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UNCLAS HANOI 001007

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SUBJECT: GVN "CLOSES" CENTRAL HIGHLANDS TO FOREIGNERS,
INCLUDING U.S. DIPLOMATS

Ref: A. HCMC 391 B. Hanoi 692

1. (SBU) Summary: Embassy and ConGen officers, who had been told the Central Highlands were "closed" to foreigners after demonstrations there turned violent, were stopped by police from traveling to the Central Highlands town of Buon Ma Thuot, in the province of Dak Lak, on April 10. Police stopped ConGen HCMC vehicle at a toll station and informed Mission Officers that they would not be allowed to proceed to the region as the situation was "not suitable" for foreigners. Some Vietnamese travelers were also reportedly stopped. We have not been informed officially by MFA of these restrictions, however, and have asked to meet to discuss. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Septel from ConGen will report additionally on Easter weekend disturbances in the Central Highlands (ref a), and septel from Embassy will comment on their significance and implications.

3. (U) On the morning of Saturday, April 10, Mission Officers were informed by officials from the Ho Chi Minh City External Relations Office (ERO) that they must postpone their previously-scheduled trip (ref b) to the Central Highlands provinces of Dak Lak, Gai Lai, and Kon Tum, and that their appointments in the region (which had been confirmed on the afternoon of April 9) had all been cancelled for now. The ERO official added that the entire Central Highlands region was "closed to foreigners for security reasons." After consulting with Mission leadership, missionoffs attempted to travel overland to the Central Highlands to assess the situation firsthand.

3. (SBU) Missionoffs proceeded as far as the town of Dong Xoai in Binh Phuoc province, about 2 1/2 hours from HCMC and 2 hours from Dak Lak province, where they were stopped by police at a toll station. Called into the toll station's office, they were met by two police officers who identified themselves as provincial immigration police. The police noted that Missionoffs had already been told by the ERO that they could not travel to the Central Highlands. Saying that the region was "not suitable" for foreigners, they politely but firmly informed Missionoffs that they would not be allowed to proceed. The police did note that Vietnamese citizens "with a reason to travel" to Dak Lak province were being allowed to continue, but said that other Vietnamese visitors were being asked to delay their trips. The police claimed that vehicles traveling from the region had shown signs of damage from rocks thrown by ethnic minority persons on the roadside. After Missionoffs began driving back to HCMC, police followed them for several miles.

4. (SBU) On the morning of April 11, Missionoffs inquired about purchasing tickets for a flight to the Central Highlands town of Pleiku, in Gia Lai province. Vietnam Airlines ticket agents informed officers that foreigners were not being allowed to fly to Buon Ma Thuot or Pleiku, although they were allowed to fly to Dalat, in the Central Highlands province of Lam Dong. Travel by air for Vietnamese citizens did not appear to be restricted. The MFA told DCM on April 10 that the missionoffs "cannot and should not" even try to take a flight to Pleiku.

5. (U) As of COB April 12, the MFA has not formally informed Embassy of new restrictions on our in-country travel. We have requested an appointment to discuss ASAP.
BURGHARDT